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Preparing Groups to Respond to Unimaginable Situations Together

We all improvise each and every day. The car next to you on the highway has a tire blow out. You see a child about to dart into the street after a ball. In these and other scenarios, you react and respond without a script, spontaneously and unrehearsed. What if the event is impossible-to-imagine, such as an active shooter, a terrorist attack, a hurricane, flood or fire? Then we must improvise with others, many times with people we do not know. Using the desire to serve and the ability to connect with others, small groups form quickly to solve high-stakes problems. The small groups follow a 5-step cycle I call “Heroic Improvisation”. The 5-step Heroic Improvisation Cycle (Alert, Ready, Connect, Focus, Move) describes how small groups naturally solve high-stakes situations together in an instant using group improvisation abilities. (See cartoon below.)

5-Step Heroic Improvisation Cycle (HIC)



The Heroic Improvisation Cycle (HIC) reveals the group improvisation abilities necessary to innovate in a moment, with anyone, anytime, anywhere. In the HIC description of small group action, “fluid leadership” emerges. Fluid leadership arises in a group when the action is driven by the high-stakes problem. Anyone can lead and everyone can follow. Since leadership is shared, anyone in the group can indicate the path of action towards a solution. Everyone will implement the action and review the results of the action together. Group learning is the top goal in fluid leadership. Risks are shared in the group, which enables rapid-fire brainstorming. There are no mistakes. Instead, all actions are experiments for group learning to solve the problem at hand.

In the Heroic Improvisation Workshop, the participants practice the improvisation abilities of:

- sharpening perception (Step 1: Alert),
- finding resources and overcoming communication barriers (Step 2: Ready),
- forming a team quickly (Step 3: Connect),
- focusing attention to solve the problem (Step 4: Focus),
- moving into action together (Step 5: Move).

Advantages of the Heroic Improvisation Workshop

- It is a low-stakes activity that prepares your team for high-stakes situations.
- It builds confidence in small group abilities needed in accidents, conflicts and disasters.
- The activities are simple and directly related to choosing together during impossible-to-imagine events.
- The exercises foster relationships and build teams for daily work and high-stakes events.
- The abilities are practiced face-to-face with no equipment, so the workshop can be set up anywhere quickly.
- The process is best for groups of 6-16 people and can be modified for larger groups.
- It can be adapted to the time available: 15-minute games, 1-hour demonstrations. 90-minute trainings or 3-hour workshops.
- All that is required is a team committed to use their imagination together and space to move around in.

Heroic Improvisation in Action

- **Heroic Improvisation saves lives and describes spontaneous rescues.** It works. I have case studies of dramatic rescues ripped from the headlines using the HIC. I have documented many stories of how Filipinos survived Super-Typhoon Haiyan in November 2013. Their successful survivor stories demonstrated they used the same model found in the HIC to rescue themselves and others.
- **Heroic Improvisation activities transcend language.** We have run the workshop in the Philippines using English, Tagalog, the Manila-area language and Waray, the local language in Central Philippines most impacted by the Super-Typhoon. We also transcended the differences in the Spanish spoken by Salvadoran, Guatemalan and Honduran child migrants, when we did a version of this workshop with them in the U.S.. We even broke through the communication barrier to reach the Guatemalan children who only speak their tribal language.
- **Heroic Improvisation works for diverse people and groups.** We have done the workshop with over 200 participants in the Philippines, ranging in age from 10 - 70 years old. We have run the workshop with different groups, such as citizens, disaster survivors, disaster volunteers, emergency responders, unaccompanied child migrants (6-17 years old) and staff groups from airlines, child-care facilities, conference centers and schools.
- **Heroic Improvisation improves confidence level of participants as a community.** Super-Typhoon survivors made choices together in an impossible-to-imagine storm to save their lives and the lives of others. It wasn't only by chance that they survived. They saw that they also took actions together that helped them find solutions. The key outcome for our workshop for survivors was confidence. We had survivors self-assess how ready they are for future disasters on a scale from 1 to 10. At the start of the workshop, survivors rated themselves no higher than 3. At the end of the workshop, they rated themselves no lower than 7. They also felt empowered to respond to the next disaster together as a team. In the workshop, we met our goal of helping a community help themselves.
- **Heroic Improvisation helps us “go all in” to help all of us.** During difficult times, many people want to make a difference. They also want to feel confident in their ability to help themselves and others. Heroic Improvisation Workshop is a practical way to show how groups can work together imaginatively in catastrophe.
- **For Video about Heroic Improvisation in action.** <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cfKUN5t9T1I>